

HENRY MARTYN: A BUNDLE OF FIRE

March 7, 2007 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article) -

The following biographical sketch is from *Heroes of Faith on Pioneer Trails* by E. Myers Harrison, former pastor of Judson College Church, Rangoon, Burma; copyright 1945 by Moody Bible Institute. These are excellent stories to read in family devotions or to use in other contexts with children. It is important to keep the Greatest Work on Earth, which is missionary work, before our children and youth and to pray that the Lord will send forth laborers into His harvest. The essence of fruitful Christian living is death to self and surrender to God's will, and few things exhibit this more powerfully than sacrificial missionary work. Sadly, very few Bible believing Christians today are familiar with the challenging stories of influential pioneer missionaries of past days.

In the city of Calcutta a young Englishman enters a deserted Hindu temple and, while many-armed figures of heathen gods look on, throws himself upon his knees in an ecstasy of fervent prayer: "Precious Lord, I was once in the far country, burning up my life in the service of sin. But when I looked to Thee in penitence and surrender, Thou didst have need of me. Thou didst desire that I should be, not a brand of fire spreading destruction, but a torch of illumination shedding abroad Thy light. Here I am in the midst of heathen midnight, dark, savage, and oppressive. Now, my Lord, let me burn out for Thee!"

The Heart that yearned after him!

The Hand that rescued him!

The Love that knew his worth!

This young Englishman was Henry Martyn and when he knelt in a Hindu temple and prayed, "Now, my Lord, let me burn out for Thee!" he was thinking of the text that animated his life--Zechariah 3:2. This text was also a favorite of John Wesley. To the end of his long life Wesley kept on the wall of his study a penciled drawing of the rectory and of the fire from which he, as a child of six, was rescued just in the nick of time. And, underneath the picture, Wesley wrote with his own hand the prophet's fiery question, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

Robert Morrison also rejoiced in the truth embedded in Zechariah 3:2 and its companion verse, Amos 4:11, and often voiced thanks to "the Hand that plucked me from the burning." John Williams, martyr missionary of Polynesia, was another who prized this

text. "I have no time to lose," he said, "for am I not a brand plucked from the burning?" Out of a sense of unspeakable gratitude--in that a brand so unworthy had been rescued from destruction, and with a feeling of tremendous urgency--in that at best the rescued brand had not long to burn Henry Martyn joined with John Wesley, John Williams, and others in saying "I am a brand plucked from the burning."

Henry Martyn was born at Truro, Cornwall, England, February 18, 1781. Concerning this young hero of the Cross Sir James Stephen said, "His is the one heroic name which adorns the annals of the English church from the days of Elizabeth to our own."

The short and eloquent annals of this noble life may be summed up in three statements: (1) A Bundle of fire Was Rescued by One Who Prized It; (2) A Bundle of fire Was Set Upon an Indian Candlestick; (3) A Bundle of fire Burned Out.

A BUNDLE OF FIRE RESCUED BY ONE WHO PRIZED IT

In Luke 15, three people were greatly concerned about "the lost." A father brooded over his lost son, a shepherd searched for his lost sheep and a woman hunted diligently for her lost coin. These three--his father, his sister, and his pastor--sought after "that which was lost," and his name was Henry Martyn.

John Martyn (Henry's father) has as pastor a Mr. Walker who, like his friend John Wesley, discoursed much on "the new birth." Martyn rejoiced in the evangelical ministry of Mr. Walker and, in addition to faithful church attendance, he was a member of a group which met regularly for the cultivation of a deeper Christian life through Bible study and earnest seasons of prayer. He became importunate, not so much over specific marks of waywardness in his son's life, as over the fact that he had not been "born again." In a fit of temper Henry spoke harshly to his father and left home. Later he was stunned to hear of his father's death. In his bitter grief he was enabled to see the baseness and depravity in the abysmal depths of his own heart. What he discovered is indicated in his own words: "The consummate selfishness and exquisite instability of my mind were displayed in rage, malice, and envy; in pride, vainglory, and contempt for all about me; and in the harsh language which I used to my sister and even to my father. Oh, what an example of patience and mildness was he!"

Henry's mother having died when he was an infant, he was left to the nurture of a sister, Sally. Having experienced the sweetness of redeeming grace, Sally was full of heavy concern over Henry's tempestuous and passionate nature. Her overtures and exhortations caused him to fly into a rage and he told her "in the harshest language" to let him alone. She finally secured his promise to read the Bible, "but on being settled at college," he says, "Newton engaged all my thoughts." however, his sister's fervent prayers followed him, as did her affectionate, solicitous letters, and he began in earnest reading of the New Testament.

The shepherd who sought him out was Rev. Charles Simeon, minister of Trinity Church, at King's College, Cambridge. Simeon belonged to that company of evangelical saints who, "after spending much time in secret with Jesus alone," go forth with heavenly zeal to seek those for whom Christ died. Rising at four o'clock each morning, he spent several hours in sweet communion with his Lord and in quiet meditation over the pages of his "little old quarto Bible." He proclaimed such an uncompromisingly spiritual and evangelistic message, that the respectable pew holders deserted the church and stayed at home. But the church was soon filled with earnest peasants from the countryside and serious-minded students from Cambridge. One of these students was Henry Martyn. Simeon was much impressed by the young student and marked him out as a trophy for Christ, though he had no idea of the eminence to which he would attain. Let every minister realize that he may have in his church, and every Sunday school teacher realize that she may have in her class, some boy or girl who, if saved and surrendered, may shine with Henry Martyn among the brightest orbs of Christian history.

Imagine the joy of the praying sister back home when she received a letter from Henry saying, "You have been an instrument in the hands of Providence of bringing me to a serious sense of things. Blessed be God, I have now experienced that Christ is the power of God unto salvation. What a blessing is the gospel! No heart can conceive its excellency but that which has been renewed by divine grace."

He could now apply to himself the prophet's question, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

He was a brand perishing in the conflagration!

He was a brand snatched from destruction!

He was a brand saved for some divine purpose!

Martyn now consecrated himself wholly to God's service instead of pursuing his original intention of being a lawyer, which profession he had set his mind upon, he said, "chiefly because I could not consent to be poor for Christ's sake."

Having become "a new creation in Christ," his enjoyments were purified and his satisfactions elevated. He had been inordinately ambitious and now, at the age of twenty, he received the two highest academic honors of the university. He stood first in the examination for degrees, in consequence of which he was recognized as Senior Wrangler, and he was also the first Smith's prizeman. As he entered the Senate House to begin his examinations, there flashed into his agitated mind the text of a powerful sermon he had heard recently from the seraphic lips of Charles Simeon: "And seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not . . . saith the LORD" (Jer. 45:5). When the results were

announced and he knew that he had achieved his coveted goal, instead of possessing a sense of elation he was overwhelmed with disappointment. "I had obtained my highest wishes," he states, "but was surprised to find that I had grasped a shadow."

Just as there were three persons who sought Martyn for Christ, so there were three who influenced him to dedicate his life to foreign missions.

1. Charles Simeon influenced him by a very moving sermon on "The Lost Estate of the Heathen."

2. His heart was stirred by accounts of the self-sacrificing labors of William Carey in India.

3. Perhaps the most impelling influence came through reading the Memoirs of David Brainerd. Every ember of Henry Martyn's redeemed and yielded spirit was fanned into a burning flame by the account of the apostolic zeal of the young American, who, like himself, was possessed of a delicate constitution; who, nevertheless, spurned an easy life and set forth to endure incredible hardships that he might tell the red Indians of God's saving love in Christ; and who, after five years of living death, stumbled home to New England to die in the arms of Jonathan Edward's daughter, to whom he was betrothed. Martyn offered himself for foreign service. But his plans were disrupted by the unexpected news of the loss of the patrimony which had accrued to the children at the death of their father. He could not support his sister, in addition to himself, on the slender income of a missionary. Was this the hand of God shutting the door to his missionary aspirations? Should he not continue his tutoring at the university or secure a curacy in the church, wherein he could serve Christ worthily and also support his sister? The prospect of remaining in England was immeasurably heightened by the fact that he was ardently in love with Lydia Grenfell, whose mother strenuously objected to their marriage, being unwilling to have her daughter live in some far-off land.

Martyn was no half-hearted lover and his mind was filled with visions of a home with Lydia, a quiet study, and children in the garden. Yet his love for Lydia and the call of his Lord seemed to be in deadly rivalry. He says in his Journal, "At night I continued an hour and a half in prayer, striving against this attachment . . . one while I was about to triumph, but in a moment my heart had wandered to the beloved idol. I went to bed in great pain."

Eventually the call to sacrifice triumphed and in the summer of 1805 he went on board the Union, one of a fleet of vessels bound for the East. He was going out to India as a chaplain, in which capacity he would be able to support his beloved sister and he expected also, in addition to his spiritual ministry to the English, that he would be able to make known to the natives of India "the riches of love in Christ Jesus."

A BUNDLE OF FIRE SET UPON AN INDIAN CANDLESTICK

As the ship sailed out to sea and the familiar scenes vanished from view never to be seen again, Martyn wept like a heartbroken child. His nature was as a harp of a thousand sensitive strings, yet nothing could turn him from the path of divine leading. He was a brand snatched from the burning for a holy purpose. Again and again he voices the fervent petition, "Let me be a flame of fire in the divine service."

An ocean voyage, a change of latitude and longitude, does not produce a missionary or create a passion for souls. Martyn had a hot heart long before he left England. While associated with Charles Simeon, he spent much time calling in the homes of the people, pointing both the living and the dying to "the Lamb of God." Notwithstanding the displeasure of the captain of the Union, this knight of the Cross often preached on shipboard. Because he spoke fearlessly about "sin, righteousness and judgment" the saying became current on the ship, "This fellow Martyn sends us to hell every Sunday." He was shocked and grieved at the callous indifference of most of his auditors and at the irreverence of the ship's officers, who remained in the cabin draining their bottles and filling the air with boisterous mirth. He took this as a needed discipline in patience. "This prepares me," he says, "for preaching to the heedless Gentiles."

He had left Lydia in England, but not his love for her. Thinking of her sweet form he wrote, "The world in a peculiar form has a hold upon my soul. I am now in the fire fighting hard."

After a nine months' voyage by way of the Cape of Good Hope, the ship sailed up the Hooghly to Calcutta. The first man to welcome him was William Carey, the erstwhile shoe cobbler and Baptist preacher. Martyn's zeal for missions was fanned into a flame by contact with this sainted and gifted man.

Next to Carey and his associates, Marshman and Ward, the two most important religious personages in Calcutta were two chaplains, Claudius Buchanan and David Brown. It was Buchanan's printed sermon, "His Star in the East," which helped to stir up in Adoniram Judson's heart a lively interest in the salvation of "the uttermost parts." With warmhearted David Brown and motherly Mrs. Brown and their flock of children, Martyn found his first Indian home. Mr. Brown wrote later to a friend, "Martyn lived five months with me and a more heavenly-minded young man I never saw."

During these months the new arrival occupied himself by learning the ways of the natives, in preaching to the English at the Old Mission Church and at St. John's, and in diligent study of Bengali, Persian, and Hindustani. A gifted linguist, he had made considerable progress in these languages before leaving England and during the long voyage to India. Now he would sit for hours at a time studying and conversing with his Brahmin and Moslem teachers.

His friends urged him to stay in Calcutta but, like Paul, he longed to open up new territory and to preach Christ where His name was utterly unknown. His heart rejoiced, therefore, when he arranged to be transferred to Dinapore, a station a considerable distance up the Ganges River. In Dinapore and later at Cawnpore he opened schools for children, distributed tracts, and by various means sought to make known "the old, old story of Jesus and His love" to India's perishing hosts.

He was also deeply concerned about his fellow countrymen serving as soldiers and officials. Pained by the worldliness and spiritual depravity so much in evidence, he preached to them on Romans 3:21-23 and similar passages, pointing out the tragedy of sin, the necessity of conversion, and the fullness of life available in Christ. This sort of preaching stirred up a storm of opposition among the soldiers, just as it did among the worldly-minded Nabobs in Calcutta, as it did in the case of Charles Simeon and John Wesley in England, and as it always does among people whose hearts are not afire for God and for souls. "I stand alone," Martyn wrote; "not one voice is heard to say, 'I wish you success in the name of the Lord.'"

His life as a missionary was characterized by a constant resort to prayer. Like Thomas à Kempis and other mystics, he spoke of Christ and to Christ in rapturous terms of endearment, such as "my Beloved," "my sweet and adorable Lord." Like his special hero, David Brainerd, he set aside frequent and extended seasons for communion, meditation, and intercession. "I feel," he stated, "as if I could never be tired with prayer. How sweet to walk with Jesus--to love Him and die for Him." Again he related: "I lay in tears interceding for the unfortunate natives of this country." With him prayer was no formal exercise. Prayer was holy fellowship, the medium by which heaven's peace and strength are channeled to earth, and the means by which stony hearts and evil adversaries may be most surely overcome.

Martyn gave himself to the utmost, for he knew that "the night cometh." Already there were clear signs that his health was failing fast. He often swooned from weakness due to fever or from sheer exhaustion. A burning compassion combined with a sense of urgency caused him to redouble his efforts to translate the New Testament into Hindustani, Arabic, and Persian, and thrust him out to plead with the people of India to turn from their idols and satanic practices to the living, loving, saving God. "What a wretched life shall I lead," he exclaimed, "if I do not exert myself from morning till night in a place where, through whole territories, I seem to be the only light." As someone has written:

"He preached as one who ne'er should preach again,

And as a dying man to dying men."

A BUNDLE OF FIRE BURNED OUT

A dying man he was indeed. His old lung malady reappeared with serious symptoms. His voice became almost inaudible. He seemed to be nothing more than a pale, animated shadow. But nothing short of death could quench his passion. He set out for Arabia and Persia, that he might secure help at first hand in improving his Scripture translations into the tongues of those vast areas. In Persia he jeopardized his life many times by facing fierce and enraged Mohammedans and fearlessly urging them to believe in Jesus Christ who hath "loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood" (Rev. 1:5).

In his zeal Martyn went to the Court of the Shah, the ruler of all Persia. As he preached, his auditors became furious and hurled dark threats at him. Suddenly the Hizier, or Prime Minister, stepped forth and challenged the white stranger to recite the Moslem creed. "Say God is God and Mohammed is the Prophet of God!" he demanded. It was an electric moment. The eyes of the entire court were fixed on Martyn. Anyone of them could easily have killed him by a stroke of the sword, and, by doing so, would have rid the world of a foul heretic and secured for himself a glorious entry to heaven. Martyn was tempted to temporize. Would it not be wise to say nothing and let the temper of the mob subside? Perish the thought! He would rather die than deny his Lord, either by word or silence. Standing with uplifted hand and with the glow of heaven on his face, he made his confession: "God is God and Jesus is the Son of God." And, while the people gnashed their teeth and hurled imprecations at him, he took his departure.

Henry Martyn was now, as always--

A brand plucked from the burning!
A brand saved for a high destiny!
A brand shining for Christ!

Racked with consumptive pain and coughing blood, he pushed his tortured body across the deserts. The winds blew flames, but a hotter flame burned in his soul. In a letter, David Brown said: "You burn with the intenseness and rapid blaze of heated phosphorus." In his Journal Martyn wrote: "If I complete the Persian New Testament, my life after that will be of less importance. But whether life or death be mine, may Christ be magnified in me. If He has work for me to do, I cannot die."

On the first of October, 1812, he wrote in his diary, "Oh Lord, thy will be done! Living, dying, remember me!" On the 16th of that month, with no friend to share his loneliness or to read consoling words from the Book of books, he breathed his last. One can scarcely read his last words, penned by a trembling hand, except through a mist of tears: "I think with sweet comfort and peace of my God, my Company, my Friend, and Comforter. Oh, when shall time give place to eternity! When shall appear that new heaven and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness!"

Lord Macaulay, who devoted his exceptional gifts to the task of worthily recording and preserving the history that other men had made, composed the epitaph for that lonely Eastern tomb.

Here Martyn lies! In manhood's early bloom
The Christian hero found a Pagan tomb.

Religion, sorrowing o'er her favorite son,
Points to the glorious trophies which he won.

Eternal trophies, not with slaughter red,
Not stained with tears by hopeless captives shed;

But trophies of the Cross. For that dear Name
Through every form of danger, death, and shame,

Onward he journeyed to a happier shore,
Where danger, death, and shame are known no more.

Glorious trophies! Eternal trophies! Trophies of the Cross!

Such trophies are won only at extreme cost. A brand gives forth heat and light at the cost of burning. In giving light to others, Henry Martyn had been consumed.

The brand that was prized by the Saviour, rescued by His loving hand and set upon an Indian candlestick, has burned completely out. But what does it matter? At its fervent flame a thousand other lives have lighted the torch of sacrificial devotion and multitudes that waited so long in darkness have rejoiced in the coming of a wondrous light!

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